

Bernard Hopkins' Sudden Change Of Heart?

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 16 February 2005 18:00

Last week middleweight champ Bernard Hopkins said during an interview that he will accomplish what Sugar Ray Robinson could not - move up to light heavyweight and annex a world title at 175 pounds. Hopkins continued: "I am a boxing history fanatic and I want history to follow me to my grave. I want to do something that is historic, and that's win the light heavyweight championship from a man named Glen Johnson who is a friend of mine. I want to do what Sugar Ray Robinson couldn't do and go right from middleweight and win the light heavyweight title. I'm on a mission to do that."

Maybe my eyes and ears are playing a big joke on me. Hopkins didn't really say "Without disrespecting the guy I got in front of me (Eastman), if I am healthy after February 19, my numbers man Richard Shaffer (of Golden Boy Promotions) will try and set it up because this is something that I want to do. Plus, Tito Trinidad and Jermain Taylor are out there so I do have a vision, an extensive game plan, for what I'm doing after February 19."

Let me just say that I have the utmost respect for Bernard Hopkins as an all-time great fighter and middleweight champion. Over the years I've adamantly defended his decision never moving up to challenge a bigger fighter and champion. I always respected that he kept himself in top condition and never ate himself out of the middleweight division like James Toney and Michael Nunn. While defending Hopkins and pointing out that he'll leave behind one of the greatest legacies in middleweight history, many countered me saying he only wanted to fight smaller fighters - with the inference being he was fearful of fighting a champion who was bigger than him. Something I didn't believe for a second and still don't.

Bernard Hopkins is a natural middleweight. In his last fight against Oscar De La Hoya this past September he weighed in at 157 pounds. Had he wanted, Hopkins could have made 154 and won the junior middleweight title. Now he says winning the light heavyweight title is something he wants to do. When I hear that, the first thing that comes to my mind is that it's a coincidence that when Hopkins finally has a change of heart about moving up, Glen Johnson just happens to be the undisputed light heavyweight champion.

Johnson has scored two of the biggest upsets in light heavyweight history in his last two fights. Last September Johnson knocked out Roy Jones, who was fighting for the first time after being knocked out by Antonio Tarver in their rematch. After knocking out Jones, Johnson decisioned Tarver this past December in his last fight, in a bout between the two fighters perceived as being the best in the division. With his knockout win over Jones and his gritty performance outworking Tarver over twelve rounds in his last fight, Johnson is regarded as the top light heavyweight in the world.

I just can't help thinking that because Johnson is the man to beat in the light heavyweight division, that has played a major factor as to why Hopkins has changed his tune. And the obvious reason for that is that Hopkins has already been in the ring with Johnson. It was back in July of 1997 that Hopkins defended his IBF middleweight title against the 32-0 Johnson.

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Hopkins won the first ten rounds of the fight with Johnson on all three cards before stopping him in the eleventh round, handing him his first defeat.

Johnson's career went on a downward spiral after losing to Hopkins. Since the Hopkins fight, Johnson has lost eight times, all by decision. However, some of the decisions Johnson lost are very questionable and there are some who saw Johnson as the winner. But that doesn't apply to Hopkins. The only time Johnson was stopped was against Hopkins in what was a clear-cut victory for Hopkins. I get the feeling that despite Johnson coming off the two best fights of his career, and fighting him at light heavyweight instead of middleweight, Hopkins doesn't have a doubt in his mind he'd come out on top if they fought again.

In other words, Bernard feels Johnson is the perfect fighter to make history against. With a win over Johnson, Hopkins would join Dick Tiger and Roy Jones as being the only middleweight champs to move up and beat the recognized light heavyweight champ in the last fifty years.

Hopkins has said he's going to do what the fighter many believe (myself included) is the greatest pound for pound fighter in boxing history, Sugar Ray Robinson, could not do. Robinson, the undefeated world welterweight champion and five time middleweight champion, failed in his bid to capture the light heavyweight title from Joey Maxim on June 25, 1952. Robinson (131-2-2), the reigning middleweight champion, entered the ring against Maxim weighing only 157½ pounds to Maxim's 173 pounds. Prior to fighting Robinson, Maxim held wins over former light heavyweight champs Freddie Mills and Gus Lesnevich, along with Jimmy Bivins and future heavyweight champion Jersey Joe Walcott.

The Maxim-Robinson light heavyweight title bout was fought at Yankee Stadium in New York in 104 degree heat. Referee Ruby Goldstein was overcome by the high temperature and had to be replaced by Ray Miller in round ten. Robinson lost when he was unable to get up after Round 13, suffering from heat prostration. At the time of the stoppage, Robinson was leading on all cards 10-3, 9-3-1 and 7-3-3. Most likely had Robinson fought Maxim on any other day in any other venue, he would have won the light heavyweight title.

I don't understand what Hopkins means saying he'll do what Sugar Ray could not.

After defending Hopkins all these years - and believe me I'm not taking a shot at him now - I respect him too much - how come the light heavyweight title is suddenly so important? How come it wasn't something he wanted to do when Roy Jones was the king of the light heavyweights?

Even after Jones was knocked out by Antonio Tarver in their rematch, Hopkins never said he wanted to fight Tarver, or that winning the light heavyweight title was on his agenda. Tarver was regarded as the top light heavyweight in the world from May 2004 through December 2004 and not once did Hopkins say he wanted to do what Sugar Ray could not.

Now that Glen Johnson is recognized as the top light heavyweight in the world, a fighter he obviously feels confident he can beat, winning the light heavyweight title is something he wants. Again, the timing seems awfully coincidental. Maybe it's Hopkins way of driving the price up for

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a rematch with Felix Trinidad, or a showdown with the up and coming Jermain Taylor? Or has he really had a change of heart, and now winning the light heavyweight title is something he's starting to focus on? And will that change if Tarver beats Johnson in their rematch tentatively scheduled for this coming May?

I'm a huge fan of Bernard Hopkins the fighter. I never once thought that he feared fighting Roy Jones. I think he felt on par with Roy as a fighter and felt he deserved close to the same money. However, with his seemingly sudden change of heart regarding moving up to challenge for the light heavyweight title, the timing does seem a little convenient.